DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 463 864 PS 030 279

AUTHOR	Song, Younghwan; Lu, Hsien-Hen
TITLE	Early Childhood Poverty: A Statistical Profile.
INSTITUTION	Columbia Univ., New York, NY. National Center for Children in Poverty.
SPONS AGENCY	Ford Foundation, New York, NY.; Carnegie Corp. of New York, NY.
PUB DATE	2002-03-00
NOTE	8p.; Some figures may not reproduce well.
AVAILABLE FROM	National Center for Children in Poverty, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, 154 Haven Avenue, New York, NY 10032-1180. Tel: 212-304-7100; Fax: 212-544-4200; e-mail: nccp@columbia.edu; Web site: http://www.nccp.org.
PUB TYPE	Numerical/Quantitative Data (110) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	Age Groups; At Risk Persons; Blacks; Change Strategies; Comparative Analysis; Family Structure; Hispanic Americans; One Parent Family; *Poverty; Public Policy; *Young Children
IDENTIFIERS	Ethnic Differences; Risk Factors

ABSTRACT

Noting that young children in poverty face a greater likelihood of impaired development because of their increased exposure to a number of risk factors associated with poverty, this report presents statistical information on the incidence of poverty during early childhood. The report notes that the poverty rate for U.S. children under age 3 remains high (18 percent) despite its decline since 1993 from 27 percent, with very young children more likely to be poor than any other age group. Young children who live with single mothers are far more likely to be poor than those who live with married parents. The poverty rate for Black and Hispanic children under age three is three times higher than that for White children. Hispanic young children living in a two-parent family are three times as likely to be poor as Black children and the gap is increasing. For the majority of poor children under age three, having parents who are employed does not prevent them from living in poverty. It is argued that the welfare reform of the 1990s has removed much of the safety net of public assistance for poor children and that the increasing unemployment in the current recession poses new challenges for them. The report maintains that postponing a debate about how to reduce young child poverty will increase the ultimate costs of corrective actions. The report concludes by asserting that it is possible to develop and implement strategies to reduce young child poverty that would still be consistent with American values. (KB)

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Younghwan Song and Hsien-Hen Lu

National Center for Children in Poverty
Mailman School of Public Health
Columbia University

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March 2002

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154 Haven Avenue, New York, NY 10032

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Early Childhood Poverty
A Statistical Profile (March 2002)

Millions of Children in the U.S. are at Developmental Risk Because of Poverty in Early Childhood

Compelling research over the last several years demonstrates that the first years of life are more important than had been thought for children's emotional and intellectual development. This research significantly increases the urgency of addressing one of the most important risk factors that can impede young children's development: poverty. Unfortunately, almost one in five young children (18 percent in 2000) in the United States lives in poverty during the early years that are so important to future life chances. The 2.1 million children under age three who are poor face a greater likelihood of impaired development because of their increased exposure to a number of factors associated with poverty. These risk factors include:

- inadequate nutrition
- environmental toxins
- diminished interaction due to maternal depression
- trauma and abuse
- lower quality child care
- parental substance abuse

For a more detailed description of the effects of poverty on brain development, see NCCP's fact sheet, *Poverty and Brain Development in Early Childhood*, at www.nccp.org.

Each of the risk factors listed above can have a particularly negative impact on brain development during early childhood. As children in poverty grow into adolescence and adulthood, they are more likely to drop out of school, have children out of wedlock, and be unemployed.

The poverty rate for U.S. children under age three remains high despite recent decline.

As Americans pay greater attention to the needs of children during their first years of life, it is critical that poverty be recognized as perhaps the single most powerful factor that can negatively influence brain development. It is also necessary for

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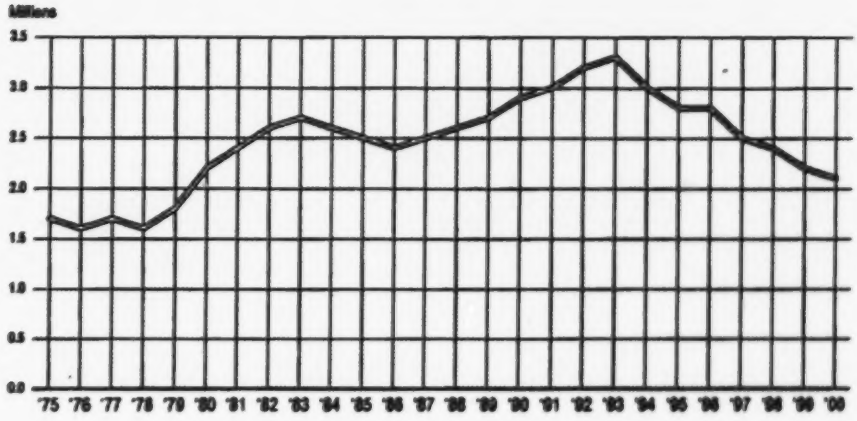
Americans to recognize that poverty is still prevalent among young children, despite declines since 1993. In 2000, the number and percent of children under age three living in poverty in the United States reached the lowest level since 1980. Compared with the highest level in 1993, the number and percent of children under age three living in poverty dropped from 3.3 million to 2.1 million, and from 27 percent to 18 percent—a 33 percent decrease.

Number of poor children under age three, 1975–2000

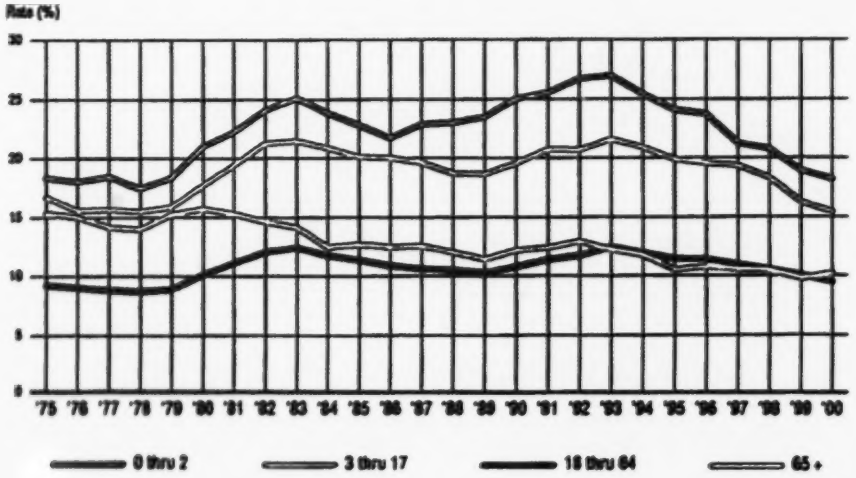
Since 1993, the number of children living in poverty has been reduced by one-third, but the current economic downturn could bring back the sharp increases in child poverty the United States experienced in the recessions of the early 1980s and 1990s.



- ***Young children are still more likely to be poor than any other age group, despite the recent large decrease in the poverty rate for children under age three.*** The poverty rate for children under age three was about 80 percent higher than the rate for adults or the elderly in 2000. The poverty rate for young children is also significantly higher than the poverty rates for older children and continues to represent a disturbing picture of young child poverty in the United States.

Poverty rates by age, 1975–2000

Very young children are more likely to be poor than any other age group.



- ***Two out of every five young children in the United States run the risk of living in poor or low-income ("near poor") families.*** Nearly 40 percent of all children under age three lived in poor or nearly poor families in 2000. In addition to the 2.1 million young children who lived in poverty in 2000, another 2.6 million children under age three lived in near poverty (in families with incomes below 200 percent of the poverty line—the threshold for eligibility for the Medicaid and State Child Health Insurance (SCHIP) programs in many states).

Young children who live with single mothers are far more likely to be poor than those who live with married parents.

- ***Young children living with their mothers only are about five times as likely to be poor as those living with married parents despite recent declines in young child poverty.*** The poverty rate for children under age three living with only their mother decreased from 63 percent in 1993 to 45 percent in 2000, while the poverty rate for children under age three living with married parents decreased from 14 percent in 1993 to 9 percent in 2000. In 2000, there were 1,288,000 poor children living in single-parent families and 751,000 poor children living with married parents.

Poverty rates for young children vary dramatically by ethnicity and family structure.

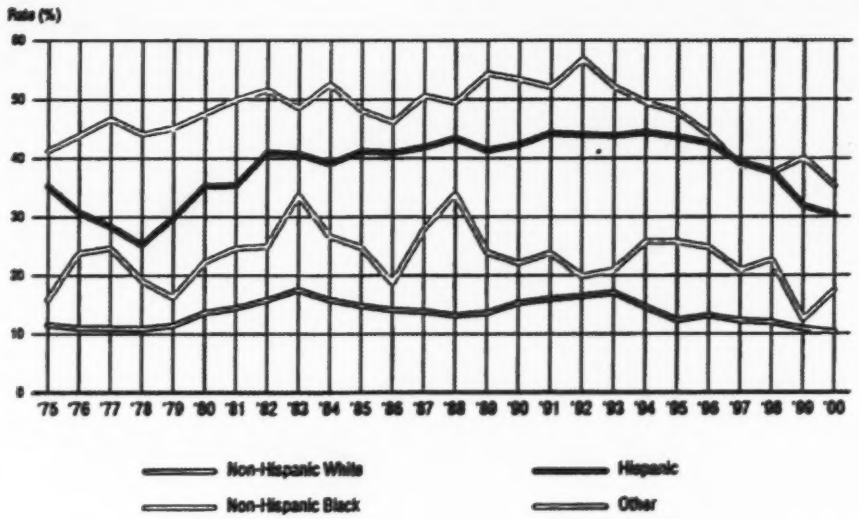
Minority young children continue to have significantly higher poverty rates than White children. And these poverty rates have substantially varied for minority children over the last three decades and also by the type of family they live in.

- ***The poverty rate for young Black and Hispanic children under age three is still three times higher than that of White children.*** The poverty rate among Black children under age three decreased to 35 percent in 2000, from 57 percent in 1992. The poverty rate among Hispanic children under age three also decreased, from 44 percent in 1992 to 30 percent in 2000. These rates, however, are still higher than the poverty rate among White children under age three—10 percent in 2000.

- ***Over half of all young Black children and nearly half of all Hispanic young children living in single-mother families are poor.*** Among children under age three living with only their mother, the poverty rate among Black children was 52 percent, and the poverty rate among Hispanic children was 45 percent in 2000.

Poverty rates of children under age three by race/ethnicity, 1975–2000

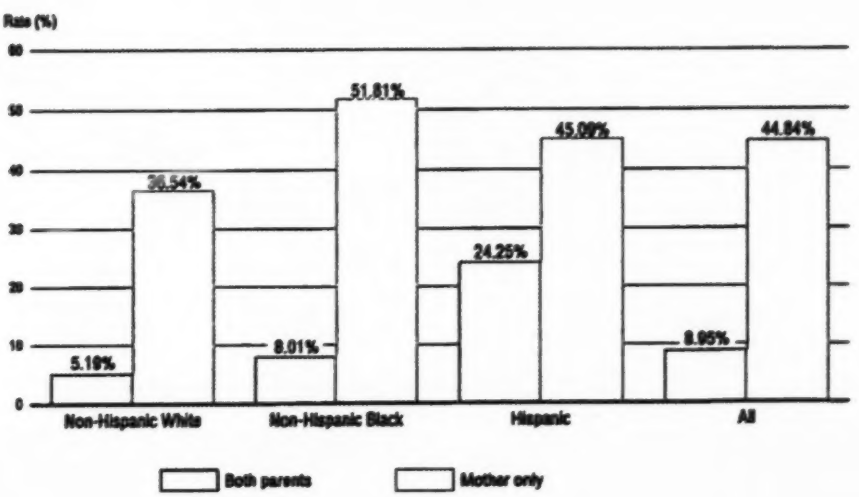
Black and Hispanic young children are three times more likely to be poor as White children.



- ***Hispanic young children living in a two-parent family are three times as likely to be poor as Black children, and the gap is increasing.*** **Among children under age three living with married parents, Hispanic children (24 percent) were three times as likely to be poor as Black children (8 percent), and almost five times more likely to be poor as White children (5 percent) in 2000. In fact, among children under age three living with married parents, Hispanic children consistently have a higher poverty rate than Black children, and the gap has been increasing dramatically since the mid 1970s.**

Poverty rates of children under age three by race/ethnicity living in two-parent and single-parent families, 2000

Poor young children are more likely to live in single-mother families, but one-quarter of Hispanic young children in two-parent families live in poverty.



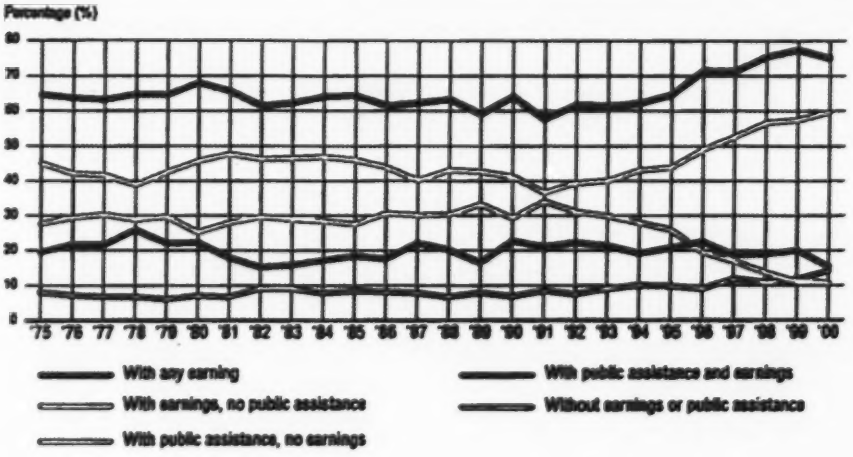
For the majority of poor children under age three, having parents who are employed does not prevent them from living in poverty.

The long economic expansionary period in the 1990s and the welfare reform legislation of 1996 have provided more employment opportunities to parents. Parents' employment, however, does not necessarily guarantee escape from poverty.

- ***The majority of poor young children live in working families.*** The percent of all poor children under age three living in families relying exclusively on earnings increased to 59 percent in 2000, the highest level since 1975. When those receiving public assistance as well are included, 75 percent of all poor children under age three lived with at least one parent or relative who earned money to support family needs, a 23 percent increase from 61 percent in 1993.

Percentage distribution of poor children under age three by source of family income, 1975–2000

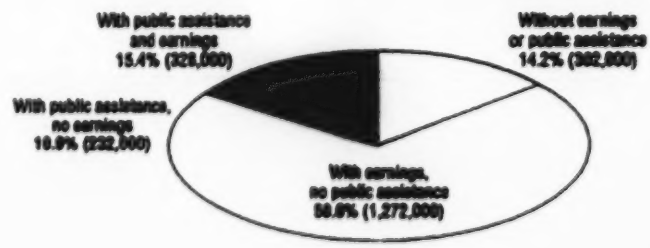
The majority of young poor children have working parents and do not rely on any public assistance.



- ***Only 11 percent of poor children under age three live in families relying exclusively on public assistance.*** In 2000, the number of poor children under age three living in families relying exclusively on public assistance decreased to 232,000 from a recent peak of 1 million in 1991—a 68 percent decrease from its highest level of 34 percent in 1991. During the same period, the number of poor children under age three living in families relying exclusively on earnings increased to 1.3 million in 2000 from 1.1 million in 1991.

Percentage distribution and number of poor children under age three by source of family income, 2000

Very few poor families with young children rely exclusively on public assistance.



The costs of young child poverty are staggering and unsustainable.

Despite the unprecedented economic boom in the 1990s, there are still 2.1 million children under age three living in poverty. Parents' employment does not necessarily guarantee escape from poverty. Among these young children in poverty, more are from working families than ever before. The welfare reform of the 1990s has removed much of the safety net of public assistance for poor children. The changing economic environment and increasing unemployment in the current recession pose new challenges for young children in poverty.

In addition to the human costs of child poverty, there are large economic costs to the nation as a whole. If millions of children continue to grow up in poverty, enormous constraints will be placed on the productivity and competitiveness of America's future labor force. Child poverty rates are intertwined with income inequality.

The problem of young child poverty cuts across racial and geographic boundaries. It is highly probable that continuing to postpone a national debate about how best to reduce the rate of young child poverty in the United States will only allow the problem of young child poverty to touch more families and communities and increase the ultimate costs of corrective action. Other nations with fewer resources than the United States have been able to do a far better job of preventing poverty among their young children. The United States can learn from these nations and from its own dramatic success in reducing the poverty rate for elderly Americans. It is certainly possible to develop and implement strategies to reduce the poverty rate for young children in the United States that would be consistent with American values.

National Center for Children in Poverty
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The National Center for Children in Poverty at the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University works to identify and promote strategies that prevent child poverty in the United States and that improve the lives of low-income children and their families. NCCP was founded in 1989 at the initiative of the Ford Foundation and Carnegie Corporation of New York. For more information, visit NCCP on the Web at www.nccp.org.

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By Younghwan Song, Research Analyst, National Center for Children in Poverty and Hsien-Hen Lu, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Public Health, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University

Editor: Carole Oshinsky Design and production: Tally Valdellon

National Center for Children in Poverty
Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University
154 Haven Avenue, New York, NY 10032-1180
TEL: (212) 304-7100 FAX: (212) 544-4200 OR 544-4201 E-MAIL: nccp@columbia.edu